



September 2016

MILITARY READINESS

DOD's Readiness
Rebuilding Efforts
May Be at Risk
without a
Comprehensive Plan

Why GAO Did This Study

For over a decade, DOD deployed forces to support operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is now supporting increased presence in the Pacific and emerging crises in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. These deployments have significantly stressed the force.

The House Report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 included a provision that GAO review DOD's efforts to rebuild military readiness. This report (1) describes the factors that affect reported readiness levels and DOD's efforts to manage the impact of deployments on readiness, and (2) assesses DOD's implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts. This report is a public version of a previously issued classified product and omits information DOD identified as SECRET, which must be protected from public disclosure.

GAO analyzed and reviewed data on reported readiness rates and departmental readiness rebuilding efforts. GAO interviewed DOD, Joint Staff, and combatant command officials regarding current demand and readiness rates and challenges with rebuilding military readiness. GAO also conducted separate reviews of the readiness of the military services.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that DOD and the services establish comprehensive readiness goals and strategies for implementing them, as well as associated metrics that can be used to evaluate whether readiness recovery efforts are achieving intended outcomes. DOD generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-16-841](#). For more information, contact John Pendleton at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov

MILITARY READINESS

DOD's Readiness Rebuilding Efforts May Be at Risk without a Comprehensive Plan

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) recognizes that more than a decade of conflict, budget uncertainty, and force structure reductions have degraded military readiness, and the department has efforts under way to manage the impact of deployments on readiness. The military services have reported persistently low readiness levels, which they have attributed to emerging and continued demands on their forces, reduced force structure, and increased frequency and length of deployments. For example, the Air Force experienced a 58 percent decrease in the number of fighter and bomber squadrons from 1991 to 2015 while maintaining a persistent level of demand from the combatant commands for the use of its forces. In addition, the Navy has experienced an 18 percent decrease in its fleet of ships since 1998 and an increase in demand, resulting in the deployment lengths for many ships increasing from 7 months to a less sustainable 9 months. DOD officials have indicated that overall demand has been decreasing since 2013, but the department has reported that the ability to rebuild capability and capacity is hindered by continued demand for some forces. To mitigate the impact of continued deployments on readiness, the Joint Staff has focused on balancing the distribution of forces for high-priority missions with the need to rebuild the readiness of the force. Efforts include revising major plans to better reflect what the current and planned force is expected to achieve and improving the management of DOD's process for sourcing global demands by, among other things, balancing the supply of forces with the minimum required to meet global demands. However, it is too soon to tell what impact implementation of these initiatives will have on DOD's readiness recovery efforts because the department is still working to complete implementation.

DOD has stated that readiness rebuilding is a priority, but implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts have not fully included key elements of sound planning, putting the rebuilding efforts at risk. Key elements of sound planning for results-oriented outcomes include a mission statement supported by long-term goals, strategies for achieving the goals, metrics, and an evaluation plan to determine the appropriateness of the goals and effectiveness of implemented strategies. In 2014, DOD tasked the military services to develop plans for rebuilding readiness. Each service developed a plan based on the force elements that were experiencing a high pace of deployments or facing challenges in achieving readiness recovery. In 2015, the services reported their readiness rebuilding plans to DOD, which identified readiness goals and timeframes for achieving them, but these goals were incomplete and some of the timeframes have been extended. GAO found that the services have also not defined comprehensive strategies, with the resources required for achieving the identified goals, nor have they fully assessed the effect of external factors such as maintenance and training on readiness rebuilding goals. Moreover, the services have not fully established metrics that the department can use to oversee readiness rebuilding efforts and evaluate progress towards achieving the identified goals. Without DOD incorporating key elements of sound planning into recovery efforts, and amid competing priorities that the department must balance, successful implementation of readiness recovery plans may be at risk.

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Abbreviations

DOD	Department of Defense
DRRS	Defense Readiness Reporting System
RA	Readiness Assessment
Readiness DMAG	Readiness Deputy's Management Action Group

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September 7, 2016

Congressional Committees

The fundamental purpose of the military is to fight and win our nation's conflicts, and the Department of Defense (DOD) has recognized the negative impact that more than a decade of deployments in support of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has had on the readiness of the force. Consequently, DOD has made rebuilding the readiness of the military force one of the department's priorities and has outlined this priority in a key strategic guidance document. Specifically, the Guidance for the Employment of the Force states that it is an overarching priority of the department to recover service readiness to preserve the long-term health of the force.¹ In addition, the 2015 National Military Strategy suggests that DOD has consumed readiness as quickly as it has been generated for nearly a generation and that the department is taking action to better balance achieving immediate operational goals with improving readiness for potential future contingencies.²

The high pace of operations has created challenges for the all-volunteer force in its ability to respond to current demands. The global security environment will likely continue to require significant reliance on U.S. military forces to respond to a range of demands even as the department faces a period of budget constraints including across-the-board spending reductions through sequestration and force structure reductions. As a result, DOD must ensure that the force is poised to meet a range of global needs.

¹Department of Defense, *2015-2017 Guidance for the Employment of the Force* (February 2015). The Guidance for the Employment of the Force provides 2-year direction for operational planning, force management, security cooperation, and posture planning to the combatant commands and is the method through which the Office of the Secretary of Defense translates strategic priorities into implementable direction.

²U.S. Department of Defense, *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America* (2015). The National Military Strategy prioritizes and focuses the efforts of the Armed Forces by defining national military objectives and how to accomplish the objectives and addresses the military capabilities required to execute the strategy.

The House Report accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for 2016 included a provision for GAO to submit a report to the congressional defense committees that provides a comprehensive, independent assessment of DOD's efforts to rebuild readiness.³ The House Report also included a provision that GAO assess the plans of the Departments of the Army, Air Force, and Navy to rebuild readiness. We briefed your staff on our work on the services' efforts to rebuild readiness in February 2016 and March 2016 and issued three related service-specific, classified reports in May 2016.⁴ As a complement to those reviews, this report (1) describes the factors that affect reported readiness levels and DOD's efforts to manage the impact of continued deployments on readiness, and (2) assesses DOD's implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts.

This report is a public version of our June 2016 classified report.⁵ DOD deemed some of the information in the prior report as SECRET, which must be protected from public disclosure. Therefore, this report omits SECRET information and data such as readiness trend data, deployment data, and selected details of the services' readiness recovery plans. Although the information provided in this report is limited in scope, it addresses the same objectives as the classified report (with the exception of removing the discussion of readiness levels from the first objective) and includes the same recommendations. Also, both reports use the same overall methodology.

To describe the factors that affect reported readiness levels and to identify steps that the department is taking to manage the impacts of continued deployments on readiness, we reviewed readiness reporting documents, including joint force readiness reviews and quarterly readiness reports to Congress, and analyzed associated readiness data

³H.R. Rep. No. 114-102, accompanying a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for 2016.

⁴GAO, *Army: Service Faces Challenges to Rebuilding Readiness*, [GAO-16-473RC](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2016); *Navy and Marine Corps: Services Face Challenges to Rebuilding Readiness*, [GAO-16-481RC](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2016); and *Air Force: Service Faces Challenges to Rebuilding Readiness*, [GAO-16-482RC](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2016).

⁵GAO, *Military Readiness: DOD's Readiness Rebuilding Efforts May Be at Risk without a Comprehensive Plan*, [GAO-16-534C](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2016).

from 2008 through 2015. These time frames were selected to maximize available and reliable data and to determine meaningful trends. In addition, we interviewed officials from the Joint Staff and the six geographic combatant commands to discuss global demand, and we obtained and analyzed data on the global demand for forces from the Joint Staff. We assessed the reliability of readiness data and global demand data through the use of standard questionnaires, reviews of service and department-level documentation, and through discussions with service-level officials on data collection processes and Joint Staff officials on global demand reform efforts. We concluded that both sets of data were sufficiently reliable for reporting current and historical readiness trends and global demand reform efforts.

To assess DOD's implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts, we reviewed DOD's plans for managing rebuilding efforts. We reviewed guidance that the department provided to the services directing them to establish plans for rebuilding readiness. We then analyzed the service plans for rebuilding readiness, including reviewing relevant documents and interviewing officials to identify and understand the underlying assumptions, the long-term goals and time frames for achieving these goals, and the interim goals and means to assess progress. We evaluated the extent to which the services face challenges in meeting their stated readiness recovery goals within the time frames identified by analyzing service documents and interviewing service officials and operational units. We selected several key force elements from each service to complete a more detailed, though non-generalizable, case study assessment on plans for rebuilding readiness of specific force elements.⁶ We interviewed Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Staff officials to discuss DOD's role in the readiness rebuilding effort and changes being implemented to allow the services to better focus on rebuilding their readiness. We compared DOD's efforts to rebuild readiness with the six key elements of sound planning that prior GAO work identified as critical to facilitating a comprehensive, results-

⁶We provide further information on the scope and methodology of GAO's reviews of service efforts to rebuild readiness in classified reports [GAO-16-473RC](#), [GAO-16-481RC](#), and [GAO-16-482RC](#).

oriented framework.⁷ We interviewed Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Staff officials to discuss steps being taken to address any identified gaps between the requirements of a sound strategic plan, such as the need for long-term goals and strategies, and DOD's current plan. Further information on our scope and methodology can be found in appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2015 to September 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

DOD Readiness Reporting

DOD defines "readiness" as the ability of the U.S. military forces to fight and meet the demands of the National Military Strategy.⁸ DOD uses a variety of automated systems, review processes, and reports to collect and disseminate information about the readiness of its forces to execute their tasks and missions. Two of the primary means of communicating readiness information are the Quarterly Readiness Report to Congress—which is a classified product prepared by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness with input from the services, combatant commands, and Joint Staff and details military

⁷GAO's leading practices for sound planning are derived from prior work related to strategic planning. For example, GAO, *Managing for Results: Critical Issues for Improving Federal Agencies' Strategic Plans*, [GAO/IGD-97-180](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 16, 1997), and *Defense Logistics: Actions Needed to Improve the Marine Corps' Equipment Reset Strategies and the Reporting of Total Reset Costs*, [GAO-11-523](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2011). These leading practices are based on GAO's past review of 27 agencies' draft strategic plans. GAO used the Results Act supplemented by the Office of Management and Budget's guidance on developing plans (Circular A-11, part 2) as criteria to determine whether draft plans complied with the requirement for six specific elements that are to be in strategic plans.

⁸Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Guide 3401D, *CJCS Guide to the Chairman's Readiness System* (Nov. 15, 2010).

readiness on a quarterly basis—and the Joint Force Readiness Review, which is a classified product prepared by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and assesses the armed forces' capability to execute their wartime missions under the National Military Strategy on a quarterly basis.

The Joint Staff assesses the department's overall ability to resource and execute the missions called for in the National Military Strategy. The overall assessments, which are classified, are based on joint and force readiness. Joint readiness focuses on the ability of the combatant commands to provide, integrate, and synchronize forces assigned to missions, while force readiness focuses on the ability of the force providers to provide forces and support capabilities.

The military services organize their forces into units for training and equipping purposes. Joint guidelines require that commanders assess their units' abilities to perform their core competencies, or their ability to undertake the wartime or primary missions for which they are organized or designed. These classified assessments are based on four distinct resource indicators—personnel, equipment availability, equipment readiness, and how well the unit is trained to conduct its missions.⁹

Joint guidelines also require joint and service unit commands to evaluate, in near real-time, the readiness of forces to accomplish assigned and potential tasks through the Defense Readiness Reporting System (DRRS). The system provides the means to monitor the readiness of DOD components to provide capabilities to support the National Military Strategy consistent with DOD priorities and planning direction. Through DRRS, commanders, military service chiefs, and agency directors assess the ability of their organizations to accomplish a task to standard, based on their capabilities, under conditions specified in their joint mission-essential task list or agency mission-essential task list.

DOD's Global Force Management Process

In 2005, faced with a situation where its process for providing forces was not responsive enough to meet operational needs, and where the

⁹Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3401.02B, *Force Readiness Reporting* (May 31, 2011).

department was not able to provide funding to maintain the readiness of all its forces to do their full range of assigned missions, DOD established a centralized Global Force Management process.¹⁰ According to the department, establishment of the process enabled the Secretary of Defense to make proactive, risk-informed decisions on how to employ the force. The goal of Global Force Management is to allow officials to identify the global availability of forces and/or capabilities needed to support plans and operations.

The department relies on Global Force Management to distribute the operational forces that belong to the military services among competing combatant commander requirements. Each combatant command documents its need for forces and/or capabilities, and then DOD uses the Global Force Management process in the following ways to meet identified needs.

- A portion of DOD's operational forces are assigned to the combatant commands and positioned in the geographic combatant commander's theater of operations to provide shorter response times. Combatant commanders have authority over forces assigned to them until the Secretary of Defense reassigns the forces.
- The combatant commanders receive additional forces to supplement their assigned forces through the allocation process. These forces are temporarily transferred to a combatant command to meet operational demands for both steady state rotational requirements that are planned in advance and emergent needs that arise after the initial allocation plan has been approved. They supplement a combatant commander's assigned forces in order to mitigate near-term risk.
- The Global Force Management process also includes a process to apportion forces. Apportioned forces provide an estimate of the services' capacity to generate capabilities along general timelines for combatant commander planning purposes. These are the forces that a combatant commander can reasonably expect to be made available, but not necessarily an identification of the actual forces that will be allocated for use when a contingency plan or crisis response plan transitions to execution.

¹⁰DOD has never been able to provide funding to maintain the readiness of all of its forces, and the services do not plan to have all of their forces ready at one time.

DOD and the Services are Taking Steps to Manage the Impact of Continued Deployments on Readiness

Persistently Low Reported Readiness Levels Attributed to Various Factors

After more than a decade of conflict, recent budget uncertainty, and decreases in force structure, U.S. forces are facing significant challenges in rebuilding readiness. DOD officials noted that it will take a significant amount of time to realize improvements in readiness as the department works to address identified challenges. In addition, the individual military services, which train and equip forces used by the combatant commands, report persistently low readiness levels. The services attribute the low readiness levels to various factors. Specifically,

- The Army attributes its persistently low readiness level to emerging demands, lack of proficiency in core competencies, and end strength reductions. Even as the Army has brought forces back from Afghanistan, the Army faces increasing emergent demands that strain existing capacity, such as the deployment of the 101st Airborne Division in Africa to respond to the Ebola crisis. In addition, other factors contribute to readiness challenges, including a lack of familiarity among leaders and units with the ability to conduct collective training towards core competencies because the Army focused on counterinsurgency for many years. Finally, the Army is downsizing to an end strength of 980,000—about a 12 percent reduction in size. Army leadership testified in March 2015 that any end strength reductions below this level would reduce the Army's capability to support missions identified in defense guidance.
- The Navy attributes its persistently low readiness level to increased lengths of deployments for aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and amphibious ships, which has created significant maintenance challenges. The Navy currently has 272 ships, a decrease from 333 ships in 1998—an 18 percent decrease. Even as the number of Navy ships has decreased, the number of ships deployed overseas has remained roughly constant at about 100 ships. Consequently, each ship is being deployed more to maintain the same level of presence. In addition, the Navy has had to shorten, eliminate, or defer training and maintenance periods to support high deployment rates.

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- The Air Force attributes its decline in readiness to continued demands and a reduced force structure. For example, in 1991 the Air Force had 154 fighter and bomber squadrons, and as of December 2015 the Air Force had 64 fighter and bomber squadrons—a 58 percent decrease from 1991 levels. Further, its readiness level has declined because of persistent demand for forces, a decline in equipment availability and in experienced maintenance personnel, and the impact of high deployment rates on units' ability to conduct needed training.
 - The Marine Corps attributes its readiness levels to an increased frequency of deployments to support the sustained high demand for the force; gaps in the number of unit leaders with the right grade, experience, and technical and leadership qualifications; and training shortfalls, including a lack of sufficiently available aircraft to train to standards, resulting from over a decade of war.

While the services have reported readiness shortfalls across the force, there have been some readiness gains in select areas, such as Army Brigade Combat Teams and Marine Corps Infantry Battalions. For example, beginning in fiscal year 2014, reported readiness levels for Army Brigade Combat Teams generally improved, but plateaued in fiscal year 2015. In addition, readiness levels for infantry battalions have improved over the past 5 years as infantry units resumed training to core mission-essential tasks after the end of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Global Demands Are Expected to Continue and to Challenge Some Portions of the Force

Though DOD officials indicated that overall demand has been decreasing since 2013—primarily because of the drawdown of forces in Iraq and Afghanistan—DOD has reported that the ability of the military force to rebuild capacity and capability is hindered by continued, and in some cases increased, demand for some types of forces. Additionally, DOD is responding to these global demands with a reduced force structure, which further impacts reported readiness. For example, from fiscal year 2013 through fiscal year 2016, active component end strength decreased by about 7 percent and reserve component end strength decreased by about 4 percent across the force.

Combatant command demand has consistently exceeded what the services are able to supply. DOD has spent most of the last decade responding to near-term combatant command demands, primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan. Combatant command officials we spoke with acknowledged that even though demand in support of U.S. Central Command operations in Iraq and Afghanistan had been decreasing,

overall demand remains high and is likely to remain high in order to support global needs. For example, U.S. European Command officials noted that the command's assigned forces are now staying in Europe and being used to meet the growing needs of the command, such as the response to Russian aggression, which officials noted has been the most significant driver of changes to the command's needs since February 2014. Moreover, U.S. Pacific Command officials noted that their operational requirements have steadily increased to ensure adequate capability exists to address the increasingly unpredictable and provocative actions of North Korea and China.

Global demands for select force elements, such as the Air Force's personnel recovery units, the Army's division headquarters, and the Navy's carrier strike groups, have been persistently high. These high-demand force elements already face challenges in meeting service-established deployment-to-dwell ratios.¹¹ For example:

- Units within the Air Force's personnel recovery service core function have experienced challenges maintaining deployment-to-dwell ratio within the Air Force's and Office of the Secretary of Defense's stated goals of 1:2 and 1:5 for active and service component units, respectively.¹² Specifically, the HC-130 fixed wing aircraft had a deployment-to-dwell ratio of approximately 1:1 for the active duty and 1:4 for the reserve component as of January 2016.¹³
- The Army has experienced challenges in meeting the demand for division headquarters during fiscal years 2010 through 2015 and reports that it will continue to experience readiness challenges at the active component division headquarters level for the next few years.¹⁴ As of August 2015, division headquarters had a deployment-to-dwell

¹¹Dwell is defined as the period of time a unit or individual is not on an operational deployment. The ratio of time a unit, detachment, or individual is operationally deployed to the time the unit, detachment, or individual is in dwell is the deployment-to-dwell ratio.

¹²Units within the personnel recovery core function work to recover and return isolated or missing U.S. military, DOD civilians, and DOD contractor personnel.

¹³Further information on Air Force readiness can be found in GAO-16-482RC.

¹⁴The Army's division headquarters is the Army force element responsible for employing brigade combat teams and other multifunctional formations across the full spectrum of armed conflict to achieve military objectives.

ratio of less than 1:1, which requires Secretary of Defense approval and is in excess of the Army's goal of 1:2 and the Office of the Secretary of Defense's goal of 1:2.¹⁵

- Because of increased demand over the past several years, many Navy ships have been deployed for 9 to 10 months or longer compared to the 7 months the Navy reports as a sustainable deployment length. Moreover, combatant commander demand for carrier strike groups has grown and the Navy is unable to meet current demand.

Some portions of the force have experienced reduced demand and improved readiness. Our analysis shows that some of the decline in overall force demand can be attributed to the decline in demand for Army Brigade Combat Teams, which have experienced improved readiness. For example, as we found in May 2016, Brigade Combat Team demand decreased by more than two-thirds since fiscal year 2011 and was mostly met from fiscal years 2010 through fiscal year 2015.¹⁶ In addition, beginning in fiscal year 2014, reported readiness trends for Brigade Combat Teams generally improved, but plateaued in fiscal year 2015.

DOD Is Undertaking Efforts to Reform Its Force Management Process

DOD has undertaken efforts to better manage the demands placed on the force. Specifically, in 2014 the Joint Staff introduced plans to reform the Global Force Management process in an effort to address declines in readiness and capacity across the force.¹⁷ However, at the time of our report, the department was still working to complete implementation of Global Force Management reform initiatives and thus it is too soon to tell what impact implementation of these initiatives will have on DOD's readiness recovery efforts.

The department focused its Global Force Management reform on an effort to transition to a resource-informed process, instead of a process

¹⁵Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel & Readiness Memorandum, *Deployment-to-Dwell, Mobilization-to-Dwell Policy Revision* (Nov. 1, 2013).

¹⁶GAO-16-473RC.

¹⁷DOD's efforts to reform Global Force Management began in 2014, but details of the effort were not formalized until the issuance of the fiscal year 2016–2017 Global Force Management Implementation Guidance, which was in January 2016.

driven primarily by combatant command demand. The intent is to better balance the distribution of forces for high-priority missions with the need to rebuild the readiness of the force.¹⁸ Through Global Force Management reform, the department expects to be better positioned to reduce the burden on the force and allow the services time to rebuild readiness. Global Force Management reform efforts include the following changes.

- Revising combatant command plans: DOD officials noted that in 2015 the department began efforts to revise several major plans in an attempt to better reflect what the current and planned force is expected to achieve. This effort to revise major plans, which the combatant commands were currently undergoing at the time of our review, has already resulted in some changes.
- Implementing the “ceiling and floor” concept: This effort is intended to balance the availability of forces against combatant commander requirements. The “ceiling” is the maximum number of forces a force provider can generate under current funding levels while still achieving readiness recovery goals and the “floor” is the minimum force level needed in each combatant commander’s theater of operations for initial response needs. Forces included in the floor would only be considered for reallocation if there was a major operational plan being executed in another geographic area of responsibility. According to U.S. European Command officials, in an effort to rebuild service readiness, the services are not allowed to deploy forces above the identified ceiling without Secretary of Defense approval, which has resulted in more difficulty in sourcing combatant command requirements. DOD has reported that the results of implementing the “ceiling” and “floor” concept would not be fully realized until fiscal year 2017.
- Realigning the force assignment and allocation processes: This effort, which the department implemented in late 2014, is intended to realign

¹⁸Following years of sustained combat operations and consistent allocation of services’ forces at or above force provider capacity, the department adapted the Global Force Management process in order to identify the global availability of forces and/ or capabilities needed to support plans and operations. As a result, DOD reformed the Global Force Management process by transitioning to a process that more directly considers the department’s available resources, with initiatives spanning assignment, allocation, and apportionment.

the Global Force Management assignment and allocation processes to address the assignment of forces to the combatant commands prior to allocating additional forces in support of demands throughout the year. DOD uses the assignment of forces to provide the combatant commanders a base set of forces in support of both enduring and emergent requirements, thereby potentially mitigating risk. Realigning these Global Force Management processes should allow commanders to better understand the assigned forces they will have access to before requesting additional forces through the allocation process and mitigate risks inherent with declining force size and readiness challenges.

- Updating apportionment tables: DOD produces force-apportionment tables to (1) help leaders assess plans based on projected force inventory and availability; (2) inform risk estimates; and (3) inform mitigations. The overarching goal of the force apportionment tables is to provide improved assumptions to assess risk and produce better, executable plans. DOD previously required that the tables be produced annually, but through Global Force Management reform, and beginning in late 2014, the department began requiring quarterly updates to the tables. More frequent updates should provide the combatant commanders with a better representation of the forces available during planning. According to U.S. Southern Command officials, while updating the apportionment tables on a quarterly basis does not provide a sense of unit readiness, it is a helpful tool for planning purposes.
- Establishing a Readiness and Availability Priorities framework: The Readiness and Availability Priorities framework is intended to inform risk decisions and Global Force Management policy recommendations. Through the Readiness and Availability Priorities framework, the Joint Staff, in coordination with the services and combatant commands, assess the department's ability to meet prioritized mission requirements and evaluate the associated risk based on force employment decisions that have already been approved.

We found that the full impact of DOD's Global Force Management reform is not known because some elements are in the early stages of implementation. In the time since portions of the reform have been put in place, officials have cited limited progress in better managing the services' ability to meet combatant command demand. For example, our analysis of global force management data showed that between fiscal years 2013 and 2015, the number of combatant command requirements that the Secretary of Defense considered for sourcing decreased by

about one-third.¹⁹ However, in fiscal year 2015, the department was still sourcing most combatant commander-identified requirements rather than making decisions that would have benefited the services' readiness recovery efforts. Specifically, the Secretary of Defense provided full or partial sourcing to more than 90 percent of combatant command requirements.

DOD's Implementation and Oversight of Department-Wide Readiness Rebuilding Efforts Do Not Fully Incorporate Key Elements of Sound Planning

DOD has stated that readiness rebuilding is a priority, but implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts has not fully included key elements of sound planning, which could place readiness recovery efforts at risk given the continued high pace of operations and many competing priorities.

Leading practices we identified in our prior work show that sound strategic planning can enhance an agency's efforts to identify and achieve long-range goals and objectives and entails consideration of key elements during planning efforts. Key elements include (1) a mission statement; (2) long-term goals; (3) strategies to achieve goals; (4) external factors that could affect goals; (5) metrics to gauge progress; and (6) evaluations of the plan to monitor goals and objectives.²⁰ As summarized in table 1, however, our analysis of readiness recovery plans shows that DOD and the services have only partially incorporated these key elements of sound planning into their readiness rebuilding efforts.

¹⁹DOD does not track requirements that the services and the combatant commands resolve before requiring Secretary of Defense consideration.

²⁰GAO's leading practices for sound planning are derived from prior work related to strategic planning. See [GAO/GGD-97-180](#) and [GAO-11-523](#).

Table 1: Department of Defense's (DOD) and Services' Application of the Key Elements of Sound Planning to Achieve Readiness Recovery

Element	Description of element	DOD status	Service status
Mission statement	A statement that concisely summarizes what the organization does, presenting the main purposes for all its major functions and operations.	DOD strategic guidance makes it clear that rebuilding readiness is a priority that supports the department's mission of deterring war and protecting the security of the U.S. with ready forces.	Each service has promulgated guidance highlighting the need to rebuild readiness in support of DOD's mission of deterring war and protecting the security of the U.S. with ready forces.
Long-term goals	A specific set of policy, programmatic, and management goals that correspond to the mission statement and develop how an organization will carry out its mission.	DOD has established the intent to recover readiness, but has not ensured that the service-established goals reflect the department's priorities.	Each service has established some readiness recovery goals, but the goals only capture portions of the total force and have been extended over time.
Strategies to achieve goals	A description of how goals are to be achieved, including the operational processes, skills, technology, and other resources required to meet these goals.	DOD is overseeing readiness recovery by managing demand and overseeing service readiness recovery efforts, but has not defined an overall strategy to achieve readiness recovery.	Each service has established strategies that allow them to work towards their current goals, but some strategies are neither comprehensive nor complete and do not fully identify the required resources.
External factors that could affect goals	Key factors external to the organization and beyond its control that could significantly affect the achievement of long-term goals, and conditions or events that would affect the achievement of strategic goals.	DOD has not fully considered how external factors, such as funding, will influence assumptions for readiness recovery.	Each service has based its plans on assumptions that have not fully considered the impact of external factors.
Use of metrics to gauge progress	A set of metrics that will be applied to gauge progress toward attainment of the plan's long-term goals.	DOD monitors overall force readiness, but does not have metrics to gauge progress toward achieving readiness recovery goals.	Each service monitors force readiness, but only one has developed specific interim steps or milestones to gauge progress of readiness recovery efforts.
Evaluations of the plan to monitor goals and objectives	Assessments, through objective measurement and systematic analysis, of the manner and extent to which programs associated with the strategic plan achieve intended goals.	DOD directed the Readiness Deputy's Management Action Group to oversee readiness recovery efforts, but it has not developed a method to evaluate readiness recovery efforts.	Each service participates in DOD's forums for discussing readiness recovery, but only one has developed methods to evaluate the effectiveness of their readiness recovery efforts.

Source: GAO analysis of DOD information. | GAO-16-841

Mission Statement: Readiness Rebuilding Is a Mission Priority for DOD and the Services

DOD strategic guidance makes it clear that readiness rebuilding is a priority that supports the department's mission of deterring war, and each service has promulgated guidance highlighting readiness as a mission priority. Sound planning requires a mission statement that concisely summarizes what the organization does, presenting the main purposes for all its major functions and operations. In its strategic guidance, DOD states that its overarching mission is to provide military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of the United States. Further, it has

emphasized that rebuilding the readiness of the force supports its ability to accomplish the missions and to continue to meet the demands outlined in the National Military Strategy. Consequently, DOD's emphasis on rebuilding readiness is outlined in key strategic guidance. For example, the Guidance for the Employment of the Force states that it is an overarching priority to recover readiness in each service while minimizing deployments.²¹ In addition, the Defense Planning Guidance states that the components are to continue their efforts to return to desired readiness levels by the end of the Future Years Defense Program.²² Alongside its emphasis on recovering readiness, however, DOD has stated that finding the proper balance between recovering readiness, force structure sizing, modernization, and future threats is an important component of the mission and the highest priority of its leadership.²³ Thus, each of these priorities must be considered within the context of the risk they place on both the force and the mission.

While each service has promulgated guidance highlighting the need to rebuild readiness, they have not consistently prioritized the importance of these efforts. For example:

- The Army has identified readiness as its highest priority. The Chief of Staff of the Army published specific readiness guidance with the overarching objective of maximizing the readiness of the total force.²⁴ In the memorandum, the Chief of Staff noted that readiness was the service's number one priority and that there was "no other number one" priority.
- Both the Navy and the Marine Corps emphasize the importance of rebuilding readiness. Specifically, the Vice Chief of Naval Operations testified that the Navy's priority was implementation of the Optimized

²¹Department of Defense, *2015-2017 Guidance for the Employment of the Force* (February 2015).

²²Department of Defense, *Defense Planning Guidance: Fiscal Years 2017-2021* (March 2015). The Future Years Defense Program is the financial plan for the Department of Defense as approved by the Secretary of Defense and it arrays cost data and manpower over a 5-year period, and a total of 8 years for force structure.

²³Department of Defense, *2015 Annual Performance Report* (January 2016).

²⁴U.S. Army Chief of Staff Memorandum, *Army Readiness Guidance Calendar Year 2016-17* (Jan. 20, 2016).

Fleet Response Plan, which is designed to support the Navy's overall readiness recovery goals.²⁵ In addition, the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps testified in support of the Marine Corps Posture Statement that, given the current fiscal environment, the service was working to maintain a balance between current readiness and projected future readiness, but that current readiness remains its main focus.²⁶

- Air Force leaders have stated that striking a balance between today's readiness and future modernization is important, but exceptionally difficult. Recognizing the impact that combatant commander demand and uncertain funding, among other things, can have on readiness, the Air Force does not expect to recover readiness prior to 2020. However, according to Air Force and DOD strategic guidance, the Air Force must be prepared to operate in highly contested battle spaces in the future. Therefore, the Air Force is focusing on recapitalization and modernization of its aircraft to ensure it is able to meet combatant commanders' capability and capacity requirements in the future.

Long-Term Goals and Strategies: The Military Services Have Not Fully Established and DOD Has Not Validated Complete Goals or Comprehensive Strategies for Readiness Recovery

DOD has linked readiness recovery to its ability to accomplish its missions. However, the military services have not developed complete goals or comprehensive strategies for rebuilding readiness that have been validated to ensure they reflect the department's priorities. Two interconnected key elements of sound planning are to establish comprehensive and specific goals and to establish a strategy to achieve those goals.

At the department level, the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness is responsible for developing plans, programs, and policies for readiness to ensure forces can execute the National Military Strategy, as well as oversight of military training and its enablers.²⁷ The military services have the authority and responsibility to

²⁵Admiral Michelle Howard, Vice Chief of Naval Operations, *On Navy Readiness*, testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 114th Cong., 2nd sess. (Mar. 15, 2016).

²⁶General John Paxton, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, *On U.S. Marine Corps Readiness*, testimony before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 114th Cong., 2nd sess. (Mar. 15, 2016).

²⁷DOD Directive 5124.02, *Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness* (June 23, 2008).

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Entire Force and Have
Changing Time Frames

man, train, and equip forces for employment,²⁸ and are also responsible for identifying critical readiness deficiencies and developing strategies for addressing the deficiencies.²⁹ In line with these responsibilities, the Deputy Secretary of Defense established the Readiness Deputy's Management Action Group (Readiness DMAG) in late 2011. The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness then charged the Readiness DMAG with synchronizing and coordinating actions and overseeing the military services' readiness recovery efforts.³⁰ Through the Readiness DMAG, DOD required the services to develop and implement readiness rebuilding plans that describe each service's readiness goals and the time frames within which the goals could be met, with a focus on improved readiness for the full range of assigned missions. Each service has established some readiness recovery goals, but the goals only capture portions of the force and have been extended over time. Each service has also established readiness recovery strategies, but these strategies have been incomplete or not comprehensive and, in many cases, have not fully identified the resources required to achieve the goals the strategies support.

In 2015, the services reported their readiness rebuilding plans to DOD, which included some readiness goals, strategies for achieving the identified goals, and time frames for when the rebuilding efforts would be complete. Tasked by the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness to establish these plans, the services selected a representation of critical force elements that would allow them to highlight progress in working toward achieving identified goals.³¹ In

²⁸See 10 U.S.C. §§ 3013, 5013, 8013 for the responsibilities of the service Secretaries.

²⁹DOD Directive 7730.65, *Department of Defense Readiness Reporting System (DRRS)* (May 11, 2015).

³⁰The roles and responsibilities of the Readiness DMAG have not been formally documented. The Readiness DMAG was intended to be the primary venue to discuss service enhancements and refinements to readiness recovery plans. As of February 2016, the Readiness DMAG had met twice—in April and August 2015. In addition, in December 2015, according to a DOD official, the services submitted documentation provided to the Deputy Secretary of Defense on issues related to their readiness recovery efforts, but a formal meeting was not held.

³¹We have previously issued classified reports on each service's readiness recovery efforts, including case studies of specific force elements within each service that can be found in GAO-16-473RC, GAO-16-481RC, and GAO-16-482RC.

response, the services selected force elements that were either experiencing a high pace of deployments, facing challenges in achieving readiness recovery, or were key to their respective readiness recovery efforts. For example, the Navy included ballistic missile submarines, carrier strike groups, amphibious ready groups, large surface combatants, attack submarines, and patrol aircraft. As part of their initial effort, the services had set goals and time frames for achieving readiness recovery. However, by the time of our review, many of the goals had been changed and time frames had been extended. Table 2 outlines the key force elements that the services' readiness recovery plans are based on and the goals and time frames for the plans.

Table 2: Summary of Military Services' Readiness Recovery Plans and Key Force Elements

Service	Key readiness recovery force elements ^a	Goals and time frames
Air Force	Each of the Air Force's 11 service core function areas.	Goals established for each of the service's 11 core function areas, but completion date has been extended over time.
Army	Brigade Combat Teams; Patriot Battalions; Terminal High Altitude Area Defense Batteries; Combat Aviation Brigades; and Division Headquarters	Goals and time frames established for portions of the force, to include Army combat forces, but not for the entire force.
Navy	Ballistic Missile Submarines; Carrier Strike Groups; Amphibious Ready Groups; Large Surface Combatants; Attack Submarines; and Patrol Aircraft	Goals and time frames established.
Marine Corps	Infantry Battalions; Medium-Lift Tilt Rotor Squadrons; and Fixed-Wing Tactical Aircraft Squadrons	Goals established but are not specific and time frames not initially specified but later established.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-16-841

^aThe key elements listed in the table provide a sample of the critical force elements upon which the services based their readiness recovery plans.

Inconsistencies exist in the individual service readiness recovery goals and in the time frames for achieving them because of DOD's decision to direct the services to develop their own respective readiness recovery plans without validating them to ensure that they are complete, comprehensive, and reflect the department's priorities. For example, the services established readiness recovery goals, but these goals are only for portions of the force in each service. For instance, the Army established specific readiness recovery goals for five force elements (Brigade Combat Teams, Combat Aviation Brigades, Division Headquarters, Patriot Battalions, and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense Batteries). Also, the Army set readiness recovery goals for a large portion of its overall active component non-brigade Combat Team force and segments of its active-duty and Army National Guard Brigade

Combat Teams, but these goals do not capture the entirety of the force. Moreover, the time frames that the services identified for achieving readiness recovery goals have been extended by some services since the plans were initially established in 2015; services extended the goals primarily because of the services' inability to achieve initially identified goals with the strategies they outlined.

Additionally, each service has either established or is working to establish strategies for helping achieve readiness recovery goals, but we found that some strategies are not comprehensive or complete. For example:

- Readiness recovery for the Navy is premised on successful implementation of the Optimized Fleet Response Plan. This plan seeks to provide a more sustainable force-generation model for Navy ships, as it reduces deployment lengths and injects more predictability for maintenance and training into ship schedules. According to Navy policy, this framework establishes a readiness-generation cycle that operationally and administratively aligns forces while aligning and stabilizing manning, maintenance and modernization, logistics, inspections and evaluations, and training. As of April 2016, the Navy had established optimized schedules for five of the six elements of the fleet and had plans to complete the remaining schedule for Amphibious Ready Groups before the end of May 2016.
- The Army's strategy to achieve readiness goals is evolving, but as yet, incomplete. A key aspect of this strategy is to develop and implement a new force generation model called "sustainable readiness," which the Army expects to implement in fiscal year 2017. The Army expects this model will provide increased predictability and visibility to optimize unit rotations and sustain readiness when units are not deployed. Additionally, the Army expects the model to generate more combat power and enabling capability given available resources, as well as to help define readiness goals.
- The Air Force strategy to rebuild readiness is predicated on conditions of consistent funding and decreasing operational demand. Without these two conditions being met, the Air Force has stated that readiness will not improve significantly. For example, the Air Force identified five influencers of future readiness, which are (1) operational tempos, as reflected in the ratio of deployment-to-dwell; (2) flying hour program; (3) critical skills availability, or having the right personnel for each position; (4) weapons system sustainment; and (5) training resource availability. Each of these influencers is affected by operational demand or consistent funding. The Air Force regularly measures its ability to increase its readiness using the five

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influencers. The Air Force found that while problems with any one area could lead to serious readiness problems, improvement required balanced efforts across all five areas.

- The Marine Corps does not yet have a measurable readiness goal with an analytical basis, or a specific strategy to meet its current overall readiness goal. The Marine Corps focuses on five institutional pillars of readiness, which include high quality people, unit readiness, capacity to meet combatant commander needs, infrastructure sustainment, and equipment modernization. In addition, the Marine Corps has established specific strategies to achieve goals developed for certain communities, such as aviation. For example, the Marine Corps issued the Ready Basic Aircraft Recovery Plan and 2016 Marine Aviation Plan in an effort to mitigate current readiness challenges and recover future readiness for the aviation community.

In overseeing readiness rebuilding efforts, neither the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness nor the Readiness DMAG has required that the services fully identify the resources required to support achievement of service-identified goals. A viable readiness recovery effort will require both DOD and the services to develop and agree on goals that can guide the efforts of the joint force, and clearly establish strategies that will result in the achievement of the goals. DOD has acknowledged challenges with funding, accepting that it is a constrained resource. However, the department has not identified the resources needed to fully implement readiness rebuilding efforts, and thus does not know what achieving readiness recovery will cost.

In addition, adding funding may not help the services recover the readiness of their forces in some cases. For example, the Air Force's Guardian Angel Weapon System, within the Personnel Recovery service core function area, is lacking experienced active-duty pararescue jumpers to meet combatant commander demand.³² To mitigate this problem, the Air Force continues to recruit new pararescue jumpers, but currently the least experienced personnel are filled well over authorized amounts, while mid-career personnel, who are required on all deployments and are

³²Guardian Angel Weapon System is part of the Air Force's Personnel Recovery service core function. Personnel Recovery is comprised of a fixed wing platform (HC-130), rotary wing platform (HH-60), and the Guardian Angel Weapon System (highly trained combat rescue officers and para-rescue jumpers).

needed to mentor and train new personnel, are filled at about half of their authorized amounts. Additional funding is not going to help the rebuilding efforts in the near term, as the units need time—about 7 years—to develop the least experienced personnel into mid-career and most experienced personnel, according to Air Force officials. In addition, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, and the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps have all testified that DOD will not be able to address readiness problems with money alone, but that factors such as operational requirements and time must also be considered.

For each service, the resource requirements needed to fully implement readiness recovery will vary by force element. For some force elements, the services understand the barriers to rebuilding readiness and in some cases have estimated portions of the expected costs. For example, we found that the Navy has estimated that total ordnance shortfalls across its aircraft carrier, cruiser, and destroyer force amount to at least \$3.3 billion for items such as torpedoes and guided missiles, which are needed to fully achieve readiness recovery. In some cases, however, the services have not quantified or budgeted for the full costs of achieving identified readiness goals for specific segments of the force because readiness recovery goals have not been established. For example, lacking clearly established readiness recovery goals for the non-Brigade Combat Team portion of the National Guard and for the entirety of the Army Reserve, the Army is unable to identify the resources that would be required to achieve such goals. In addition, the Marine Corps has not articulated a measurable readiness recovery goal with any analytical basis, and as such, is not able to identify the resources needed to achieve that goal.

External Factors: Service Readiness Recovery Plans Are Based on Assumptions That Have Not Fully Considered the Impact of External Factors

Another key element of sound planning is understanding key factors that are external and beyond agency control that could significantly affect achievement of long-term goals. DOD and the services have identified potential risks to achieving their readiness recovery goals—such as budget uncertainty—but they have not fully considered how to account for these risks, including how they will influence the assumptions on which the plans are based. Based on our work, we found assumptions in three areas that are also questionable: (1) availability of funding, (2) ability to complete maintenance on time, and (3) whether operational tempo and other factors will allow sufficient time for training.

Uncertainty About Funding

DOD has reported that time and sufficient, consistent, and predictable resourcing are needed to allow the services to rebuild readiness. In an

effort to help the services improve their readiness, Congress appropriated \$1 billion in overseas contingency operations funds in 2016 that were designated for use in readiness improvement efforts. Like the rest of the federal government, however, DOD faces across-the-board spending reductions through sequestration.³³ We previously examined the effects of sequestration on DOD, noting that the department placed an emphasis on preserving readiness when implementing spending reductions, but still expected sequestration to affect plans to improve military readiness by either delaying or cancelling activities. For example, we found that the Air Force cancelled or reduced participation in most of its planned large-scale fiscal year 2013 training events.³⁴ Moreover, like much of the government, DOD has been funded through continuing resolutions, which create uncertainty about both when they will receive their final appropriation and what level of funding ultimately will be available.³⁵ Recognizing these challenges, the Air Force cited funding levels for modernization and recapitalization as a risk to achieving readiness recovery within identified time frames, the Army noted that if sequestration were to return without a commensurate change to DOD's strategy, the impact would be devastating to Army readiness, and the Navy noted that stable and consistent funding is key to implementing the Optimized Fleet Response Plan, which is the Navy's plan to rebuild readiness.

Inability to Meet Maintenance Time Frames

Readiness recovery is premised on the services being able to meet maintenance time frames, but most of the services expect continued challenges in doing so. For example, over the last 5 years, shipyards have not completed the majority of required maintenance on time, primarily because high deployment rates have led to shortened, eliminated, or deferred maintenance periods and a growth in maintenance backlogs. In May 2016, we found that from fiscal years 2011 through

³³The Budget Control Act of 2011, Pub. L. No. 112-25 (Aug. 2, 2011), among other things, imposed discretionary spending limits for fiscal years 2012 through 2021 to reduce projected spending. Under the Budget Control Act, discretionary appropriations for DOD are subject to annual Budget Control Act spending limits, and sequestration is triggered when those limits are breached.

³⁴GAO, *Sequestration: Documenting and Assessing Lessons Learned Would Assist DOD in Planning for Future Budget Uncertainty*, [GAO-15-470](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 27, 2015).

³⁵GAO, *Continuing Resolution: Uncertainty Limited Management Options and Increased Workload in Selected Agencies*, [GAO-09-879](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2009).

2014, 89 percent of aircraft carrier maintenance periods took more time than scheduled, which also increased the costs.³⁶ Recognizing these challenges, the Navy implemented the Optimized Fleet Response Plan in 2014 in order to provide a more sustainable schedule for ships, introducing more predictability for maintenance and training. The Navy's readiness recovery goal of 2020 assumes successful implementation of the Optimized Fleet Response Plan. With only a portion of the fleet having entered this optimized cycle, it is too early to assess its effectiveness, but as we previously found, the first three aircraft carriers have not completed maintenance tasks on time, and of the 83 cruisers and destroyers, only 15 have completed a Chief of Naval Operations maintenance availability under the Optimized Fleet Response Plan.³⁷ Extended deployments to meet global demands have resulted in greater and more costly maintenance requirements. In addition, the Marine Corps is facing significant challenges in its aviation maintenance and the Air Force has significant shortages of maintenance personnel.

Lack of Time and Resources to Conduct Training

The services' readiness recovery plans are further premised on the notion that units would have the time and resources to train to meet the full range of missions assigned to them. However, the high pace of deployments, reduced time at home station, and reduced funding for conducting full-spectrum training has had an effect on individual units' ability to train and fully recover readiness. For example, the Army has stated that one of its greatest challenges inhibiting readiness recovery is difficulty maintaining collective training proficiency in its core competencies due to a lack of personnel depth and experience. Because the Army converted almost all Combat Training Center rotations between 2003 and 2012 to focus on counterinsurgency, opportunities to train thousands of company commanders, field grade officers, and battalion commanders on their unit's core competency missions were lost. A key part of the Army's plan is to ensure that these soldiers have repeated full spectrum training experience at combat training centers over the next

³⁶GAO, *Military Readiness: Progress and Challenges in Implementing the Navy's Optimized Fleet Response Plan*, [GAO-16-466R](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 2, 2016).

³⁷We have previously issued classified reports on each service's readiness recovery efforts, including case studies of specific force elements within each service that can be found in GAO-16-473RC, GAO-16-481RC, and GAO-16-482RC.

several years. However, the Army projects increasing emergent demand that may jeopardize the Army's ability to achieve this. In addition, high deployment rates for Air Force units have resulted in less time for units to complete their full training requirements. According to Air Force officials, high deployment rates mean there are fewer aircraft available to train on at home stations, and often the most experienced personnel are disproportionately deployed, leaving fewer experienced personnel available to train less experienced personnel at home stations. Moreover, the Air Force reported that the availability of training ranges, munitions for training, and training simulators, among others, were key factors for readiness rebuilding. The service has reported that while the training resource availability is relatively healthy in terms of operation and maintenance funding, substantial funding is required to address long-term investment shortfalls.

Metrics and Evaluating Progress: DOD and the Services Track Readiness Trends, but Most of the Services Have Not Established Metrics and DOD Has Not Developed a Method to Evaluate Progress Toward Achieving Readiness Recovery

An element of sound planning is developing a set of metrics that will be applied to gauge progress toward attainment of the plan's long-term goals. These metrics are then used to evaluate the plan through objective measurement and systematic analysis to determine the manner and extent to which programs associated with the plan achieve their intended goals. For example, evaluations can be a potentially critical source of information in assessing (1) the appropriateness and reasonableness of goals; (2) the effectiveness of strategies by supplementing metrics with impact evaluation studies; and (3) the implementation of programs, such as identifying the need for corrective action.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the combatant commands, and the military services assess and report, through various means and using various criteria, the readiness of forces to execute their tasks and missions. Some key reporting mechanisms include the Defense Readiness Reporting System, the Joint Forces Readiness Review, and the Quarterly Readiness Report to Congress. These processes provide snapshots of how ready the force is at a given point in time. However, most of the services have not fully established metrics to track progress toward achieving readiness recovery goals. Using metrics to gauge progress toward the attainment of a plan's long-term goals would provide the services with an objective measurement to use at specific points in identifying the extent of progress in attaining readiness recovery, and would afford the department the opportunity to know whether the efforts are achieving their intended goals. Specifically, while most of the services continue to monitor overall operational readiness through the Defense Readiness Reporting System, they have

not fully developed metrics to measure progress toward achieving their readiness recovery goals. For example,

- The Navy's readiness recovery plan—the Optimized Fleet Response Plan—is based on maximizing ship operational availability. Operational availability measures the amount of time a ship can get under way and execute a mission. The Navy has developed long-range ship schedules that project operational availability output for various force types, such as carrier strike groups, over the next 9 years. While the Navy's projections show some progress towards its operational availability readiness recovery goals, the Navy has not set specific benchmarks, interim goals, or milestones that it expects to achieve on an annual basis or otherwise to evaluate the effectiveness of readiness recovery efforts. Navy officials said that they have projections for readiness recovery and that there are some measures in place to keep leadership informed of readiness recovery efforts, but that they have not set specific benchmarks, interim goals, or milestones for tracking progress of readiness recovery efforts.
- The Army established thresholds for various metrics that impact readiness—such as sustainable deployment rates—for the select force elements that form the foundation for the readiness recovery plan. However, Army officials told us that these thresholds and metrics were not intended to be used to track its readiness progress. Rather, officials told us that the Army planned to use its process for regularly tracking, reporting, and projecting readiness to measure progress towards achieving readiness recovery, which includes periodic reports on readiness. Part of the process includes regularly monitoring the percentage of Brigade Combat Team and non-Brigade Combat Team units reporting the highest levels of readiness. However, the Army's process does not set interim benchmarks for readiness recovery. Additionally, the Army does not track, report, or project readiness against the thresholds and metrics it has established for specific active component force elements or against its broader readiness goals for Brigade Combat Team and active component non-Brigade Combat Team forces.
- In early 2016, Air Force officials described operational tempo and other conditions that are necessary to begin to recover readiness and stated that until those conditions are met, readiness will not improve significantly. Once those conditions are met, readiness is expected to improve over an 8- to 10-year period. The Air Force will continue to use current readiness metrics, to include operational tempos as reflected in the ratio of deployment-to-dwell, and critical skills

availability—having the right personnel for each position—to chart progress towards meeting its readiness recovery goal. However, the Air Force has stated that it will be at least 2020 before its starting conditions are met.

- The Marine Corps does not yet have a specific strategy or metrics to track its progress in achieving its overall readiness goal. The Marine Corps has established specific strategies and accompanying metrics to achieve goals developed for certain force communities, such as aviation, one of its most stressed communities. For example, the Marine Corps' primary metric for assessing aviation readiness recovery is having sufficient aircraft available to fully train a squadron. While Marine Corps officials state that they regularly monitor readiness through multiple forums, the Marine Corps has not set specific benchmarks, interim goals, or milestones to evaluate the effectiveness of overall or force-community-specific readiness recovery efforts. Marine Corps officials explained that they have not been required to do so.

Moreover, according to officials, lacking fully developed metrics to assess the services' ability to measure progress toward achieving intended goals, DOD has not developed a method to evaluate readiness recovery efforts. Without metrics and a method for evaluating the effectiveness of overall readiness recovery efforts through objective measurement and systematic analysis, DOD may not be able to ensure that the department is achieving its intended goals.

Conclusions

With decreased commitments to Afghanistan and Iraq, DOD has seen improvements in the readiness of certain key force elements in recent years, such as Army Brigade Combat Teams and Marine Corps Infantry Battalions. DOD still faces low overall readiness rates, however, which the services expect to persist into the next decade. The department recognizes the importance of recovering the readiness of the force and has been taking steps, such as the establishment of service readiness recovery plans and changes to its force management process, but there are other areas where the department could refine its approach that might bring meaningful improvements to the readiness recovery effort.

With the challenges posed by ongoing demand for forces around the world and the consequent high pace of operations for portions of the force, decreased time for maintenance and training, and budget uncertainty, it is important that DOD incorporate sound planning into its readiness recovery efforts. The effort for recovering readiness supports

the department's mission of providing military forces needed to deter war and to protect the security of the United States. However, we found some fundamental challenges with the overall readiness recovery effort. Specifically, the services' readiness recovery plans do not include comprehensive goals and strategies for achieving the goals, metrics on which to measure progress against identified goals, and a full consideration of external factors including how they will influence the underlying assumptions of readiness recovery. In addition, DOD has not validated the service-established readiness rebuilding goals, nor does it have metrics on which it can evaluate readiness recovery efforts to determine the extent to which they reflect the department's priorities and are achieving intended goals. Without metrics against which to measure the services' progress toward agreed-upon, achievable readiness recovery goals, DOD will be unable to determine the effectiveness of readiness recovery efforts or assess its ability to meet the demands of the National Military Strategy, which may be at risk.

Recommendations for Executive Action

To ensure that the department can implement readiness rebuilding efforts, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Secretaries of the Departments of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force to take the following three actions:

- Establish comprehensive readiness rebuilding goals to guide readiness rebuilding efforts and a strategy for implementing identified goals, to include resources needed to implement the strategy.
- Develop metrics for measuring interim progress at specific milestones against identified goals for all services.
- Identify external factors that may impact readiness recovery plans, including how they influence the underlying assumptions, to ensure that readiness rebuilding goals are achievable within established time frames. This should include, but not be limited to, an evaluation of the impact of assumptions about budget, maintenance time frames, and training that underpin the services' readiness recovery plans.

To ensure that the department has adequate oversight of service readiness rebuilding efforts and that these efforts reflect the department's priorities, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense take the following two actions:

- Validate the service-established readiness rebuilding goals, strategies for achieving the goals, and metrics for measuring progress, and revise as appropriate.

-
- Develop a method to evaluate the department's readiness recovery efforts against the agreed-upon goals through objective measurement and systematic analysis.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

In commenting on the classified version of this report, DOD partially concurred with three recommendations and concurred with two recommendations. The June 2016 classified report and this unclassified version have the same recommendations. DOD's comments are reprinted in their entirety in appendix II. DOD also provided technical comments, which we incorporated into the report as appropriate.

DOD partially concurred with our three recommendations that the secretaries of the Military Departments (1) establish comprehensive readiness rebuilding goals and a strategy for implementing identified goals, (2) develop metrics for measuring interim progress at specific milestones against identified goals, and (3) identify external factors that may impact readiness recovery plans. DOD noted that the department was currently working to define for the services the "ready for what," which will provide the target for their readiness recovery goals. DOD further noted that the department would continue to work with the military services to refine their goals and the requisite resources, as well as the metrics and milestones required to implement and track their recovery strategies. The department raised concerns with our addressing the recommendation to both the Secretary of the Navy and the Commandant of the Marine Corps in our draft, stating that the Marine Corps is part of the Department of the Navy. We have revised the recommendation to reflect this comment.

DOD concurred with our two recommendations that the Secretary of Defense (1) validate service-established readiness rebuilding goals, strategies for achieving the goals, and metrics for measuring progress, revising as appropriate and (2) develop a method to evaluate the department's readiness recovery efforts against the agreed-upon goals through objective measurement and systematic analysis. The department stated that it would continue to work with the military services to validate and evaluate their readiness recovery goals and the metrics for measuring their progress.

We are sending copies of this report to appropriate congressional committees; the Secretary of Defense; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and the Secretaries of the Air Force, Army, and Navy. In addition,

the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.



John H. Pendleton, Director
Defense Capabilities and Management

List of Committees

The Honorable John McCain
Chairman
The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

The Honorable Thad Cochran
Chairman
The Honorable Richard J. Durbin
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate

The Honorable Mac Thornberry
Chairman
The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Rodney Frelinghuysen
Chairman
The Honorable Pete Visclosky
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Defense
Committee on Appropriations
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Scope and Methodology

This report is a public version of our June 2016 classified report.¹ DOD deemed some of the information in that report as SECRET, which must be protected from public disclosure. Therefore, this report omits SECRET information and data such as readiness trend data, deployment data, and select details of the services' readiness recovery plans. Although the information provided in this report is limited in scope, it addresses the same objectives as the classified report (with the exception of removing the discussion of readiness level from the first objective) and includes the same recommendations. Also, the overall methodology used for both reports is the same.

To describe the factors that affect reported readiness levels and to identify the steps the department is taking to manage the impact of continued deployments on readiness, we reviewed and analyzed readiness data and information from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the combatant commands, and each of the military services. Our analysis covered data from fiscal year 2008 through fiscal year 2015 to maximize the amount of available and reliable data for us to determine meaningful trends. We also analyzed data from the Joint Staff on the global demand for forces to document trends in demand from fiscal year 2012 through fiscal year 2016. We identified the trend in overall demand as identified by the combatant commands and identified the trend in the portion of this overall demand that DOD provided forces to support. We evaluated the department's overall strategic-level readiness assessment (RA) and the RA of each of the military services to document trends in reported readiness.² To determine historical and current readiness levels and key factors that contributed to those levels, we analyzed Quarterly Readiness Reports to Congress, Joint Forces Readiness Review documents, and the services' readiness assessments. We also conducted interviews with Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, and combatant command officials to discuss global demand trends, and obtained documentation, such as departmental guidance and related briefings, and reviewed these documents to understand DOD's

¹GAO, *Military Readiness: DOD's Readiness Rebuilding Efforts May Be at Risk without a Comprehensive Plan*, GAO-16-534C (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2016).

²RAs are prepared by the combatant commands, combat support agencies, and the military services on a quarterly basis to show the degree to which they are prepared to execute missions under the National Military Strategy.

efforts to reform the departmental process used to source global demands. We interviewed Joint Staff officials to discuss these reform efforts and the subsequent impact the efforts had on overall readiness recovery. In addition, we assessed the reliability of the readiness data and global demand data through standardized questionnaires, reviews of documentation, and discussions with officials about data-collection processes. We concluded that both sets of data were sufficiently reliable for our purposes of reporting current and historical readiness trends and of documenting instances where the Secretary of Defense provided forces in support of requirements in favor of the combatant commands.

To assess DOD's implementation and oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts, we reviewed DOD's plans for managing readiness rebuilding efforts as outlined in Readiness Deputy's Management Action Group meeting documentation and summaries and a variety of readiness reporting documents and briefings submitted by the services, the Joint Staff, and combatant commanders. We reviewed DOD strategic-level documents and guidance, such as the Guidance for the Employment of the Force and the Global Force Management Implementation Guidance, to understand DOD's investment in readiness recovery. We then analyzed the service plans for rebuilding readiness, including reviewing relevant documents and interviewing officials to identify and understand (1) the underlying assumptions and analysis behind those plans, (2) the long-term goals and time frames for achieving these goals, and (3) the interim goals and means to assess progress. We evaluated the extent to which the service readiness recovery goals face significant challenges within the time frames identified by analyzing service documents, including internal readiness recovery projections, milestones, and risks associated with readiness recovery, and interviewing service officials and operational units. By reviewing the service readiness recovery plans and obtaining service officials' views on force elements that are key to rebuilding readiness, we selected several key force elements from each service to complete a more detailed, though non-generalizable, case study assessment on plans for rebuilding readiness of specific force elements, including historical reported readiness and demand and sourcing trends; readiness recovery

strategies; and specific risks to readiness recovery for these force elements.³

We analyzed these documents and reviewed DOD's efforts to oversee department-wide readiness rebuilding to determine if they included the key elements of sound strategic planning that GAO has identified in the course of our prior work. Specifically, we focused on six key elements that should be incorporated into sound strategic planning to facilitate a comprehensive, results-oriented framework.⁴ We selected key elements that the department would benefit from considering in its effort to achieve readiness recovery and meet the intent outlined in strategic guidance. Key elements include (1) a mission statement; (2) long-term goals; (3) strategies to achieve goals; (4) external factors that could affect goals; (5) metrics to gauge progress; and (6) evaluations of the plan to monitor goals and objectives. We determined these leading practices and the key elements to be the most relevant to evaluate DOD's oversight of department-wide readiness rebuilding efforts. We compared DOD's efforts to rebuild readiness with these key elements of sound planning practices to identify any gaps that may impact DOD's ability to recover the readiness of the force.

We interviewed Office of the Secretary of Defense and Joint Staff officials to discuss DOD's role in the readiness rebuilding effort, changes being implemented to allow the services to better focus on rebuilding their readiness, and steps being taken to address challenges in achieving

³Further information on the scope and methodology of GAO's classified reviews of service efforts to rebuild readiness is contained in GAO, *Army: Service Faces Challenges to Rebuilding Readiness*, GAO-16-473RC (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2016); *Navy and Marine Corps: Services Face Challenges to Rebuilding Readiness*, GAO-16-481RC (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2016); and *Air Force: Service Faces Challenges to Rebuilding Readiness*, GAO-16-482RC (Washington, D.C.: May 25, 2016).

⁴GAO's leading practices for sound planning are derived from prior work related to strategic planning. For example, *Defense Logistics: Actions Needed to Improve the Marine Corps' Equipment Reset Strategies and the Reporting of Total Reset Costs*, [GAO-11-523](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2011), and GAO, *Managing for Results: Critical Issues for Improving Federal Agencies' Strategic Plans*, [GAO/GGD-97-180](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 16, 1997). These leading practices are based on GAO's past review of 27 agencies' draft strategic plans. GAO used the Results Act supplemented by the Office of Management and Budget's guidance on developing plans (Circular A-11, part2) as criteria to determine whether draft plans complied with the requirement for six specific elements that are to be in strategic plans.

readiness recovery. We also interviewed officials at select combatant commands to discuss their coordination with DOD for readiness recovery, as well as any impacts resulting from service readiness recovery efforts.

We conducted this performance audit from June 2015 to September 2016 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: Comments from the Department of Defense



OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
4000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20301-4000

JUN 13 2016

Mr. John Pendleton
Director, Defense Capabilities and Management
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 22548

Dear Mr. Pendleton:

Attached is the Department of Defense (DoD) response to the GAO Draft Report, GAO-16-534C, 'MILITARY READINESS: Title Pending Classification Review,' dated May 6, 2016 (GAO Code 100134).

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft report. It is the goal of DoD to ensure our forces are prepared and ready to meet the National Security Strategy. After nearly 15 years of conducting counter-insurgency type operations, it is imperative that our forces regain the readiness to conduct full spectrum operations to counter potential near-peer adversaries. It is incumbent on the Department to ensure the Service readiness recovery plans are viable and analytically sound. When fully implemented the GAO recommendations will enhance the Department's oversight of the Service's readiness recovery goals, metrics, and milestones.

If questions should arise, please have your action officers contact Mr. Brent Barrow at (703) 693-5585.

Sincerely,

Lloyd G. Thrall
Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense
Force Readiness

Attachment:
As stated

GAO DRAFT REPORT DATED MAY 6, 2016
GAO-16-534C (GAO CODE 100134)

“MILITARY READINESS: TITLE PENDING
CLASSIFICATION REVIEW”

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE COMMENTS
TO THE GAO RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1: To ensure the Department can implement readiness rebuilding efforts, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense direct the Secretaries of the Army, Air Force, and Navy and the Commandant of the Marine Corps to take the following actions:

- Establish comprehensive readiness rebuilding goals to guide readiness rebuilding efforts and a strategy for implementing identified goals, to include resources needed to implement the strategy.
- Develop metrics for measuring interim progress at specific milestones against identified goals for all Services.
- Identify external factors that may impact readiness recovery plans including how they influence the underlying assumptions to ensure that readiness rebuilding goals are achievable within established time frames. This should include, but not be limited to, an evaluation of the impact of assumptions about budget, maintenance timeframes, and training that underpin the Services’ readiness recovery plans.

DoD RESPONSE: Partially concur. DoD is currently working to define for the Services the “ready for what,” which will provide the target for their readiness recovery goals. The Department will continue to work with the Services to refine their goals and the requisite resources, as well as the metrics and milestones required to implement and track their recovery strategies. The Department does not feel that separate guidance is required for the Commandant of the Marine Corps as the U.S. Marine Corps is part of the Department of the Navy.

RECOMMENDATION 2: To ensure that the Department has adequate oversight of Service readiness rebuilding efforts and that these efforts reflect the Department’s priorities, we recommend that the Secretary of Defense take the following actions:

- Validate the Service-established readiness rebuilding goals, strategies for achieving the goals, and metrics for measuring progress, and revise as appropriate.
- Develop a method to evaluate the Department’s readiness recovery efforts against the agreed-upon goals through objective measurement and systematic analysis.

2

DoD RESPONSE: Concur. DoD will continue to work with the Services to validate and evaluate their readiness recovery goals and the metrics for measuring their progress.

Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

John Pendleton, (202) 512-3489 or pendletonj@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, individuals who made key contributions to this report include Patty Lentini and Kristy Williams, Assistant Directors; Paul Seely; Mike Silver; Sabrina Streagle; Nicole Volchko; Erik Wilkins-McKee; and Richard Winsor.

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